

**For discussion
on 14 March 2017**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Regulating the Production of Organic Food

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on matters relating to the regulation of organic food¹ production, which include the support provided by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) to local farms on organic farming, the work of the Government/relevant organisations on promoting organic food labelling, the regulation of organic food by the Government, the recommendations of a previous consultancy study commissioned by the Government, as well as consumer education and publicity by the Government/relevant organisations.

Support Provided by AFCD

2. Fresh vegetables are currently the most significant type of locally produced organic food product. In 2000, the AFCD launched the Organic Farming Conversion Scheme (later renamed as the Organic Farming Support Service (OFSS)). The OFSS helps local farmers transform from conventional farming to organic farming through the provision of technical support, including support in horticultural skills, soil fertility management, pest and disease control and seed saving, with a view to facilitating local farmers to open up new markets and enhance their competitiveness with the production of high quality vegetables. As at February 2017, 299 farms in Hong Kong had joined the AFCD's OFSS. One-third of them joined in the past five years. Occupying a total land area of 108 hectares, these 299 organic farms produce about six tonnes of organic vegetables per day on average, accounting for less than 0.3% of the total fresh vegetables supply in Hong Kong.

¹ Different regions/countries have different definitions on organic food. Also, the certification standards and methods vary.

Promoting Organic Food Labelling

3. The Government has been promoting organic food labelling. With funding from the Agricultural Development Fund under the Vegetable Marketing Organization (VMO), the Hong Kong Organic Resource Centre (HKORC) has started to provide voluntary certification service to farmers since December 2002. The HKORC has established a set of stringent guidelines with reference to international standards, i.e. guidelines of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements, to ensure that the process adopted by organic farms complies with the certification standards of organic farming and production. Certified farms may attach a label of the certification body to their products for easy identification. At present, more than 140 units were certified under the HKORC's certification system, covering organic food products such as vegetables, cultured fish and other processed food. The HKORC conducts regular surveys to monitor the market situation.

Regulation of Organic Food

4. The major differences between organic food and ordinary food are their ways of production, processing and handling. Such differences cannot be detected by testing the food products (including vegetables). There is no significant difference between the two in terms of food safety. The Government attaches great importance to food safety. All food for sale in Hong Kong for human consumption (whether organic or ordinary food) must comply with the same set of statutory standards for food safety and quality, as well as labelling requirements to ensure its fitness for human consumption. The Centre for Food Safety (CFS) of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, through the risk-based food surveillance programme, takes food samples (including organic food) at the import, wholesale and retail levels for testing.

5. Moreover, any person who, in the course of any trade or business, makes false or misleading statements in respect of the goods (including organic food) he supplies commits an offence under the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (the Ordinance) (Cap. 362). The Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) may take enforcement actions according to the Ordinance. C&ED has been proactively handling complaints related to false trade description, adopting a risk-based approach in prioritising its enforcement actions. After securing a reasonable amount of details, it will conduct in-depth investigation and evidence gathering, and take appropriate enforcement actions, having regard to the particular facts and evidence of the cases.

Recommendations of the Consultancy Study

6. The Government commissioned a consultancy study in 2011 to assess the need for regulating the production and sale of local organic food products (including organic agricultural products). In view of the small scale of the local organic food sector and the fact that the Government's main policy objectives in respect of food are to safeguard food safety and supply stability, the consultancy report advised that there was no pressing need to introduce new legislation to regulate the production and sale of local organic food products. The consultant recommended that the Government should enhance consumer education and promote certification of organic products by administrative measures to enrich consumers' knowledge of organic food. The Government accepted the consultant's recommendations and strengthened the work on those aspects (please see paragraphs 3 and 7 for details). The Administration reported the recommendations of the consultancy study to the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene in 2013.

Consumer Education

7. The CFS provides information on organic food to the public through publicity leaflets, publications and its website. Also, the HKORC organises various types of activities every year to introduce recognised certification labels to the public, and encourage them to read the organic certificates of vegetable outlets carefully and buy vegetables with organic certification at reputable shops. Besides, the VMO and the HKORC publish on their websites information on local organic food, such as details of those outlets supplying local organic vegetables.

Conclusion

8. The Government will continue to enhance consumer education on organic food, enrich consumers' knowledge of organic food, strengthen the technical support for farmers and improve the existing administrative measures. It will continue to promote the organic certification scheme and carry out regular surveillance and enforcement work. Also, we will keep in view the latest international development on the regulation of organic food and review the local circumstances and needs from time to time.

Advice Sought

9. Members are invited to note and comment on the matters as set out in the paper.

**Food and Health Bureau
Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department
Centre for Food Safety, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department**

March 2017